

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments October 2004

No Lapham matter

by Roger Kimball

On Lewis H. Lapham's recent article titled "Tentacles of Rage: The Republican Propaganda Mill"; a fantasy of disturbing proportions.

As we write, the great entertainment afforded by Dan Rather, the celebrity news reader, is still unfolding. How solemn Mr. Rather looked a few weeks ago as he unveiled, on *60 Minutes II*, those incriminating memoranda. Mr. Rather has basically two modes when performing: Deeply Sincere—the mode that he adopted, for example, when interviewing Saddam Hussein shortly before the dictator's mandatory retirement last year—and Righteously Indignant. He adopted the latter as he explained to his television audience that, back in the early 1970s, President Bush got special treatment when he was in the National Guard: See, it says so right here in black and white.

It took about fifteen minutes for some alert bloggers to start picking holes in Dan Rather's evidence. How odd that those memoranda, broadcast to millions on the eve of a presidential election, should boast superscripts and proportionally spaced letters, typographical niceties that are common as dirt now but that were far beyond the capabilities of even the most advanced office typewriters in the early 1970s.

But this is CBS talking! Never mind those weirdos in pyjamas who sit in front of their computers all day pretending to be news commentators. (The "pyjamas" was a nice touch, much ridiculed by Internet bloggers.) We authenticate our documents! We had no fewer than four experts vet the memos (though we will tell you the name of only one). We stand by our story. We can't, of course, reveal our source for the memos: sanctity of journalistic freedom, the public's right to know, a matter of principle. The memos are genuine. We stand by our story. We stand by our story ...

Bluster. Stonewall. Collapse. Perhaps the most pathetic moment came, a week or two into what had already come to be called Rathergate (or, sometimes, Rathergate), when the \$7 million news reader announced that, should the documents turn out to be forgeries, he wanted to be the one to break the story. Too late for that, Dan! Four-hundred and twenty-seven bloggers beat you to it.

If wishes were horses, beggars would ride and those memos would be genuine. My, how strenuously the mainstream media—what gleeful bloggers have begun referring to as “legacy media”—wished. A prize for effort must go to *The New York Times*, which explained in a headline that “Memos on Bush Are Fake but Accurate, Typist Says.” Think about that: “Fake, but Accurate”: that is, “Guilty, though Innocent.”

As the dust settles, there are still a few unanswered questions—such as, who forged those memos? We know now that Dan Rather’s “unimpeachable” (yes, really) source was one Bill Burkett, a wretched chap who spends a lot of time scheming to bring down President Bush. But where did he get the documents? Silence on that one, and no surprise, since, as William Safire pointed out, we might well be dealing here with a felony. “If the artifice had not been revealed by sharp-eyed bloggers,” Mr. Safire noted, “a national election could have been swung by a blatant falsehood.”

But wasn’t that the point, the object, of the exercise? Let’s say someone sidled up to Dan Rather and offered him documents of doubtful authenticity and mysterious provenance that were damaging to John Kerry: would he have rushed to share them with the nation? Would *The New York Times* have entertained us with the Orwellian “Fake but Accurate” gambit? To ask these questions is to answer them. The so-called “mainstream” media may be on its way to “legacy” status; there can be no question, however, about its left-leaning, anti-Republican, and especially its anti-Bush, political bias. How ironical, then, that even as Rathergate was slouching towards Nowhere to be born, Lewis H. Lapham, the longtime editor of *Harper’s*, should publish “Tentacles of Rage: The Republican Propaganda Mill” in the September issue of that once-distinguished magazine. Mr. Lapham subtended the rubric “a brief history” to the title of his 7500-word jeremiad; “a desperate fantasy” would have been more accurate.

Mr. Lapham has made an awesome discovery. Conservatives have ideas; moreover, they are willing to support those ideas by funding people and institutions that promote them!

Mr. Lapham doesn’t put it like that, of course. On the contrary, he treats the readers of *Harper’s* to page after page of breathless, hysterical prose in order to expose “the re-education program undertaken in the early 1970s by a cadre of ultraconservative and self-mythologizing millionaires bent on rescuing the country from the hideous grasp of Satanic liberalism.” If Lewis Lapham is right, American democracy is facing its gravest threat ever. No, Islamofascism is not the problem—it’s *Republicans*. At least since the early 1970s, he says, rich and insidiously clever Republicans have duped the American public with policies whose goals include the “the deliberate impoverishment of the American middle-classes,” the suspension of “civil liberties,” “the privatization (a.k.a. the theft) of its common property—the broadcast spectrum as well as the timber, the water, and the air, the reserves of knowledge together with the mineral deposits and the laws.” How diabolically clever those Republicans are, for they have managed to “sell the suckers on the notion that their ‘values’ are at risk (abortionists escaping the nets of the Massachusetts state police, pornographers and cosmetic surgeons busily at work in Los Angeles, farm families everywhere in the Middle West becoming chattels of the welfare state)” while

simultaneously distracting them from the fact that “their pockets have been picked.”

How did these evil people manage this political and intellectual larceny? Money and, if Mr. Lapham is right, stupidity. Conservatives, he warns, have spent \$3 billion in the past thirty years promoting their ideas—well, Mr. Lapham doesn’t say “promoting their ideas,” for it is part of his gospel that conservatives don’t have ideas, only—here he quotes Lionel Trilling—“irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.” But all that money wouldn’t have had its desired effect unless the American public, sheeplike, was susceptible to this horrible assault on its freedoms and interests. How lucky we are, then, to have Mr. Lapham: like Ishmael, he only has escaped to tell us of this enormity.

Mr. Lapham’s essay is full of charts and tables detailing the nefarious flow of money to conservative causes. There is nothing new here: liberals have been “exposing” philanthropic support for conservative causes for years. Three billion dollars in thirty years—that’s a lot of money. But wait, doesn’t the Ford Foundation support a galaxy of left-wing causes with half a billion dollars *every year*? And what about the Rockefeller Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, the various MacArthur Foundations? (The J. Roderick MacArthur Foundation, Mr. Lapham neglects to mention, provides an annual subsidy of \$2,150,000 to *Harper’s*.) What about, for that matter, Teresa Heinz Kerry, who through her foundations doled out \$65 million to left-liberal causes in 2002?

In fact, liberal philanthropy outspends conservative philanthropy by at least a factor of 25 to 1. But that is immaterial to Mr. Lapham. For him, conservatives by definition do not support ideas, they support “propaganda.” Indeed, in the world according to Lapham, conservatives by definition are propagandists, never thinkers. Norman Podhoretz is “a rabid propagandist.” Irving Kristol, though charming and “bright” (thanks, Lewis!) is also a “propagandist” who betrayed his early Trotskyite commitments for filthy lucre: “the times changed, the winds of fortune shifting from east to west, and after a stint as a CIA asset in the 1950s, he had carried his pens and papers into winter quarters on the comfortably upholstered bourgeois right.”

According to Mr. Lapham, no conservative writes a book or article in order to say what he thinks is true; he does it at the behest of some nameless conservative power broker in order to advance a political interest. Milton Friedman’s *Free to Choose*, Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground*, Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*: you might have supposed these were thoughtful contributions to important issues of the day. Not a chance of it: Mr. Lapham reveals that they are merely “expensively purchased and cleverly promoted tracts.”

It must be said that Mr. Lapham’s imagination was working overtime in “Tentacles of Rage.” Not to put too fine a point on it, the piece is filled with errors, misstatements, and outright fabrications. One delightful bit of fantasy involves Mr. Lapham’s claim that he was offered \$200,000 a year “for life” to edit what would become *The New Criterion*. If only. That sum, Mr. Lapham said (more than \$380,000 in today’s money), “spoke to the seriousness of the rightist intent to corner and control the

national market in ideas.” Ah, yes, if only we could get Lewis Lapham on our side, then we would at last be able to “corner and control the national market in ideas”!

But the most compelling moment of fantasy came when Mr. Lapham reported on the Republican National Convention. “The speeches in Madison Square Garden,” Mr. Lapham wrote,

affirmed the great truths now routinely preached from the pulpits of Fox News and *The Wall Street Journal*—government the problem, not the solution; the social contract a dead letter; the free market the answer to every maiden’s prayer—and while listening to the hollow rattle of the rhetorical brass and tin, I remembered ...

“While listening”? “Remembered”? Oh dear, oh dear. Mr. Lapham forgot that he wrote and published this *before* the Republican National Convention. One grateful reader commended Mr. Lapham on his ability to travel in time. Mr. Lapham replied that his “rhetorical invention” was a “mistake.” But it wasn’t a mistake. As Nick Schulz wrote on the Internet site Tech Central Station, “the only ‘mistake’ Lapham made is in revealing for all to see what has long been known by anyone who pays attention to the news: the major media routinely bring to their coverage of significant political events a predetermined storyline—you might want to call it a ‘Lapham.’ Facts that undermine the storyline are ignored or explained away as aberrations to “The Truth.”

As an epigraph for “Tentacles of Rage,” Mr. Lapham quotes Richard Hofstadter: “When, in all our history, has anyone with ideas so bizarre, so archaic, so self-confounding, so remote from the basic American consensus, ever got so far?” That is, we thought, an excellent question. The officials at the J. Roderick MacArthur Foundation may wish to ponder it while inhaling the Lapham gas that *Harper’s* has become.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 23 Number 2 , on page 1

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